

Data-driven crime fighting

Local police gain access to CJLEADS statewide system

By Olivia Neeley | Times Staff Writer

A registered sex offender's GPS device went off. He was at the state fair. Time was critical.

With a click of a new statewide database system, authorities were able to get a photo of the sex offender and distribute it across the vast space of the fairgrounds. Officers found the man. But where they found this registered sex offender proved to them how valuable this particular system works.

"He was outside the little boys room," said State Controller David McCoy.

Now the same tool used in that situation will be available to law enforcement agencies across Wilson County. On Wednesday, seven counties were added to the list of implementing the system called CJLEADS — Criminal Justice Law Enforcement Automated Data Services.

Agencies attended a kick-off meeting held at Nash Community College in Rocky Mount. The state implemented the final phase of the statewide expansion of CJLEADS.

"It integrates all of the state's criminal justice data on all the offenders we have in the state," McCoy said about the database. "That's 41 million files on 13 million offenders."

Officials say in just a matter of seconds law enforcement, district attorneys, judges, magistrates and clerks alike can access an offender's information at their fingertips.

"Before we had to go into different databases to find what we are looking for," said Wilson Police Capt. Eric Smith. "Now, we can find what we are looking for in one place."

Smith, who attended the training, said he's been looking forward to something like this for years. The system will not only save officers time, it will assist them with investigations, keeping track of criminals and ultimately protect the lives of those in the community.

As soon as officers and court personnel here are trained, the Internet-based secured system is then activated. Smith said they are then given a state-issued password.

Before CJLEADS, it could take officers days and sometimes weeks to sift through, click on and track down information about an offender.

"All of this data has existed, but has existed in different data systems," McCoy said. "They (the officers) don't live in this CSI world that people think they do."

Smith said one of the perks about this system is how officers can simultaneously check systems including courts, jails, the Department of Correction, DMV and sex offender records.

In order for an officer to get access to the information, the officer would go to a particular file set, pull the information and continue to do that same process until they were able to assemble that information into an investigative profile on a case they were working on, McCoy said.

While the program gives authorities a comprehensive view of an offender, it can also be a tool to save officers' lives.

It allows those officials to positively ID an offender through a photograph, provide an "offender watch," which has the capability to give officials an alert when that offender's status has changed.

It also helps officers who are on the streets know right away what the offender looks like and if they need to approach the suspect cautiously. And it will also let them know if a suspect has orders for arrest or warrants issued

for them.

Judges and other court officials will know instantly if the defendant sitting in court already has a lengthy court record.

Smith said the value of the program will be immeasurable for agencies fighting crime and protecting the community.

"They will never realize how much this system will ever mean to us," he said.

WHAT PROMPTED THE SYSTEM?

North Carolina has been trying to do something like CJLEADS since 1994, McCoy said. But a set of tragic events would take place before its pilot program would be started in October 2008 in Wake County.

Eve Carson, University of North Carolina's student body president, was shot to death on the street not far from campus in March 2008.

Lawrence Alvin Lovette Jr. and Demario James Atwater were charged in Carson's slaying. But what came to light after the tragic event prompted the state to take action. The two men had a lengthy record and several mishaps were found prior to Carson's slaying.

The state investigation revealed Lovette never met with his probation officer while Atwater's probation cases were handled by multiple officers. Authorities later connected Lovette to Duke University engineering student Abhijit Mahato, who was killed a few months prior. Lovette pleaded guilty to unrelated charges two days prior to Mahato's death, where he received a suspended sentence of two years and placed on probation. Six weeks after Mahato's killing, authorities arrested Lovette several times, charging him with crimes including burglary, car theft and breaking and entering. He was released after each arrest.

Atwater, who had been ordered to be placed under intense probation, was scheduled to appear on a probation violation stemming from a firearm charge. He was sent to the wrong courtroom and the probation hearing was delayed.

Carson was killed a few days later.

"When you build things from different systems, you gave gaps," McCoy said. "The General Assembly said they wanted to have something done about this and done about it immediately. They charged our office to developing the system."

McCoy told the crowd something in the following seconds that stunned some. Carson was killed about 200 yards away from his own home. She was friends with his daughter and his wife had taught her in school.

"We heard Eve's murder," he said. "And so did the General Assembly."

Wilson Police Capt. Smith said Carson's case could be a thing of the past with the implementation of CJLEADS.

"They will never be able to count the Eve Carson's they've saved," Smith said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.